



VIPs: Volunteers in Parks



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A PUBLICATION ON THE JOHN H. CHAFEE BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR



Preceding page: Volunteers-in-Parks in uniform at the National Heritage Corridor Commission. Above, cross country skiers; Bill Potter, VIP at River Bend Farm; volunteers at Big Night salamander crossing.

The Volunteers-in-Parks (VIP) Program is a National Park Service program that was created in 1970. It enables the Park Service to effectively integrate volunteers into park programming varying from management and preservation to interpretation and public education. The Volunteers-in-Parks Program aims to create a mutually rewarding experience for the volunteer and for the needs of the Park Service. To date, more than 120,000 volunteers have given over 4,000,000 hours to America's treasures throughout the National Park Service.

The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor was established in 1986 to preserve and protect the historic and cultural attributes of the birthplace of "America's Industrial Revolution." Our growing Volunteers-in-Parks program has a dual purpose. It offers much to the ever growing number of heritage sites in the Blackstone Valley, and it offers people who live in the Blackstone Valley – actually in the National Park – an opportunity to communicate with visitors and to give of themselves. The result – an enriched experience for the visitor and the volunteer!



Pete & Rita LaBonne: Committed to the National Heritage Corridor

If there are "veterans" of the Heritage Corridor Volunteers-in-Parks Program, it would surely be Pete and Rita LaBonne. Rita has been volunteering with the National Heritage Corridor since it was first proposed. In its earliest days, she could often be found answering the National Park Service phones during the week. But then her husband, Pete, retired from his job and Rita convinced him that life was more exciting with the National Park Service. Expedition 2000! in September of 2000 found Pete hauling canoes out of the Blackstone River and Rita coordinating refreshments at several portage sites. Undeterred, a year later they were on the river's banks again as volunteers for the Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge. Remarkably, they still have time to drive their motor home

to their favorite campsites and to visit their grandchildren. In fact, Pete and Rita often bring their grandchildren along to help out and one granddaughter recently volunteered with the Polar Express train rides. Yet another generation of Volunteers-in-Parks in the making!

Students are Volunteers-in-Parks, too!

The River Club at Woonsocket High School is a program that recognizes the value of the Blackstone River and its communities. "As an educator, it is important to me to get my students involved in community issues," explained Woonsocket High School Science teacher Michael Ferry. "We are so fortunate to have a formalized program that is sponsored by the National Park Service. It makes it easier to get the kids involved and there is something for everybody to volunteer for each month – from nature walks to office work to the Polar Express train rides," he added. Teacher-Coordinator Michael Ferry urges other educators to start similar programs. He wrote the curriculum for his classroom prototype and is grateful that the Volunteers-in-Parks program is in place to help him make his student's program a part of the Blackstone River Valley community.

The River Club, whose student members now wear Volunteers-in-Parks t-shirts and caps when they are working with the community, also takes its message of Blackstone River



VIPs from Woonsocket High School River Club



Woonsocket High School teacher Michael Ferry explaining his students' River Club to Ms. Fran P. Mainella, Director of the National Park Service.

awareness out to other students. Club members have recently collaborated with Central Falls High School students and not only shared their water quality data but worked together to find effective methods to conduct chemical tests on the river. The River Club also visits local elementary schools and conducts workshops on the Blackstone's water quality and teaches younger children about the macro invertebrates that live in the river. Mentoring and volunteering from the banks of the Blackstone River!



Julia Grassini receives special recognition from Barbara Dixon of the National Park Service.

Julia Grassini: Volunteering Can Change Your Life

There are many benefits to volunteering. In Julia's case, she will tell you that she has met many interesting people and done many things she would not typically do as a result of working with the National Heritage Corridor. "There is a niche for everyone," she said. "If you don't enjoy one project, go back and try again. There are so many ways you can learn about the river and help to make things happen!" she added. "People ask me why I volunteer when I don't get paid. I tell them how I do, indeed, in so many different ways."



Suzanne Buchanan: VIP Program Coordinator

National Park Ranger Suzanne Buchanan faced her audience at the Museum of Work and Culture one recent autumn night and told them: "I don't fundraise any longer. I *friend-raise*!" With her warm and enthusiastic personality, Suzanne eagerly cultivates friendships and, in doing so, she nurtures a growing cadre of volunteers who cheerfully participate in the Volunteers-in-Parks program throughout the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

As Ranger Buchanan will tell you, it is easy to do something you love. While she has been a ranger with the National Park Service for the past eight years, it is important to note that Suzanne is a "native" and grew up in the Blackstone Valley of Rhode Island. Reaching out to the people of the Blackstone Valley comes easily. Becoming the Volunteers-in-Parks Program Coordinator comes naturally to her and she is an effective advocate and promoter for the program and its volunteers.

"There are many exciting and rewarding aspects of this program for the Heritage Corridor and for individual volunteers," says Ranger Buchanan. "One of the most exciting aspects of the Volunteers-in-Parks Program is that we can bring so many benefits to our heritage sites when we pool our human resources and share volunteers throughout the Blackstone Valley. We offer an 'umbrella' program that can meet a variety of needs at our heritage sites," she added. "Come down and join us!"





Ethel Halsey guides an interpretive walk.

From River Bend Farm...

The VIP program helps the State Park provide many more interpretive programs than we would be able to provide with our limited staff. The VIPs have presented programs about wildflowers, Maple Sugaring, Blackstone Canal history, plant identification, canoeing, history of the Industrial Revolution, and the Blackstone River Watershed, just to name a few.

Two of the VIPs, Bill Potter and Barney Harcourt, have been staffing the River Bend Farm Visitors Center one day a week since it opened in 1995. They provide historic interpretation and tourism information to the park's visitors on days when the DEM staff person is off. We are lucky to have these dedicated people.

It takes a special person to be a volunteer. A person who is willing to take time out of their life to spend it helping other people. It takes a good listener and someone who is kind and compassionate. I think volunteering helps to give our lives purpose and meaning.

I wish to congratulate and thank all our VIPs for taking the time to make someone else's life a little brighter. I think there is a special place in heaven for each one of them.

John Pelczarski
Forest & Park Supervisor III
Blackstone River & Canal Heritage
State Park

Benefits to Volunteers

Volunteers-in-Parks program volunteers play vital roles in the ability of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor to meet and inform our visitors as well as event and program participants at our numerous heritage sites, museums and parks. In recognition of their efforts, National Park Service VIP uniforms, hats and name plates are provided. Volunteers get to know each other at monthly meetings held at different sites where they are often given *behind the scenes* looks at what makes that particular site effective and special. Volunteer Susan Shea has "volunteered" to write and produce a monthly VIP newsletter containing volunteer news and opportunities. If training will make you a better volunteer, VIP coordinator Suzanne Buchanan is prepared to assist you to make sure that you get the information you need.

Benefits to Heritage Sites

"This is an exciting opportunity that any of our heritage sites and programs can tap into," Coordinator Suzanne Buchanan explained. "If there is a large event coming up, we can coordinate our volunteers to assist with that event. Volunteers get to know other volunteers, the work is shared and everyone has a great experience. That's what this program is all about!" she added. Volunteers-in-Parks also lend continuity to the National Heritage Corridor experience. Visitors seeing Volunteer-in-Parks uniforms know they can rely on solid information and assistance from that volunteer. Finding those uniforms throughout the Corridor adds to their heritage tourism experience. If you would like your site or event to develop a relationship with the Volunteers-in-Parks program, call Coordinator Suzanne Buchanan at the number below.

VIP Student Sponsorship

The Volunteers-in-Parks program is working to encourage the development of more student programs like the one at Woonsocket High School. If your company or organization would like to sponsor a classroom or school project, contact Suzanne Buchanan. An annual donation of \$350 will supply participating students with Volunteers-in-Parks t-shirts and caps and other necessary supplies. Your sponsorship will also be acknowledged throughout the following year in the Volunteers-in-Parks monthly newsletter.

There is a wide array of activities and programs available to those interested in volunteering with the Volunteers-in-Parks Program. Below are examples of programs with Volunteers-in-Parks participants. More are being added monthly! Join us!

Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, RI • River Bend Farm Visitors Center, Uxbridge, MA • The Museum of Work & Culture, Woonsocket, RI • Friends of the Blackstone, Riverfest, May 18, 2002, RI • Woonsocket High School River Club - Student Volunteer Program • Polar Express Train Rides and other events for the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, RI • A New Coat for Anna Story Hour and Coat Collection program • Passport to History in the Blackstone Valley • Special events for the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor • Trail Maintenance • Water Quality Monitoring • Walking Tours • Interpretive Programs at Historic Sites • Wild Plant Walking Tours • Canoe/Kayak Trips down the Blackstone River • Resource Management Projects • Paddle Club Activities • Cross-country Ski Tours Office/Administrative Assistance at the National Heritage Corridor

To join the Volunteers-in-Parks Program, call Ranger Suzanne Buchanan at the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor office at 401-762-0440 or, e-mail her at Suzanne_Buchanan@nps.gov, or fill out the form below and send it to:

The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor

One Depot Square
Woonsocket, RI 02895

FAX : 401-762-0530



I would like to know more!

- ☐ I am interested in volunteering.
☐ My heritage site/organization needs Volunteers-in-Parks help.
☐ My company is interested in sponsoring a classroom.
☐ I would like to start a VIP program in my classroom.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

The best way to contact me is:

Via e-mail: _____@_____

Via telephone: day _____ - _____

evening: _____ - _____

☐ Send me your newsletter
so I can learn more!

